QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
Regarding the 12-Month Finding for the Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout

Results of a recent status review indicate that Endangered Species Act listing of the Yellowstone cutthroat trout, found in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah and Nevada, is not warranted at this time. The following are questions and answers regarding this finding.

What is the Yellowstone cutthroat trout?
The Yellowstone cutthroat trout (YCT) is one of about 13 subspecies of cutthroat trout native to interior regions of western North America. Cutthroat trout owe their common name to the distinctive red or orange slash mark that occurs just below both sides of the lower jaw.

What is the range of the YCT?
The historic range of Yellowstone cutthroat trout generally consists of the waters of the Snake River drainage (Columbia River basin) upstream from Shoshone Falls, Idaho, and those of the Yellowstone River drainage (Missouri River basin) upstream from and including the headwaters of the Tongue River, in eastern Montana. Historic range in the Yellowstone River drainage thus includes large regions of Wyoming and Montana, whereas that of the Snake River drainage includes large regions of Wyoming and Idaho and small parts of Utah and Nevada.

Today, various Yellowstone cutthroat trout stocks remain in at least 35 of the 40 major river drainages they historically occupied in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah and Nevada.

Most of the habitat for Yellowstone cutthroat trout lies on lands administered by Federal agencies, especially the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service. Moreover, many of the strongholds for Yellowstone cutthroat trout occur within roadless or wilderness areas or Yellowstone National Park, all of which afford considerable protection to the fish.

What is a 12-month finding?
Publication in the *Federal Register* of a 12-month finding makes public the Service's decision on a petition to list a species as threatened or endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act. That finding is based on a detailed assessment of the available information on the species, as detailed in the species' status review. One of three possible conclusions can be reached as part of the finding: that listing is warranted, not warranted, or warranted but presently precluded by other higher-priority listing activities involving other species. In the case of YCT, the Service found that the YCT is not likely to become a threatened or endangered species within the foreseeable future. Therefore listing of the YCT as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act is not warranted at this time.

What information was considered when making this finding?

Service considered information and comments received from several State fish and wildlife agencies, the U.S. Forest Service, Yellowstone National Park, environmental organizations, Tribes, and the public.

Part of the new information received was a 2003 status assessment report for Yellowstone cutthroat trout coauthored by the U.S. Forest Service and fish and wildlife agencies for the States of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada. This assessment is a comprehensive document covering the entire range of the fish and best describes the present-day range-wide status of Yellowstone cutthroat trout in the United States.

What did the Service find regarding the status of YCT?
Although the YCT has declined from historic levels, the assessment reports that approximately 195 conservation populations of YCT presently occupy about 6,352 stream miles of habitat. Robust populations occur throughout the historic range of the subspecies, most notably in headwater areas. These populations form a solid basis for the long-term persistence of the fish.

Using genetic standards that were formally adopted by the States in 2000 to identify core and conservation populations of cutthroat trout, the status assessment found populations meeting this standard collectively occupy about 84 percent (6,352 stream miles) of the total habitat occupied by YCT throughout its current range.

What are "core" and "conservation" populations?
As defined by state standards, core populations are considered genetically uncompromised. Conservation populations may have slight levels of hybridization (<10 percent) with rainbow trout or other cutthroat trout subspecies which may be detectable by genetic analysis, but such hybridization would not be visually apparent. At this level, a fish would conform to the scientifically-defined physical characteristics of that cutthroat trout subspecies. Under ESA standards, if it looks like a cutthroat trout and acts like a cutthroat trout, it is considered to be a cutthroat trout.

What factors can affect YCT populations?
Many factors that have historically affected Yellowstone cutthroat populations, such as excessive harvest by anglers or stocking of nonnative fishes. These activities, however, can be effectively countered by the ongoing current management actions of State and Federal agencies.

Hybridization with nonnative rainbow trout continues to affect Yellowstone cutthroat populations. The eventual extent that hybridization occurs in Yellowstone cutthroat trout habitat may be stream specific and impossible to predict. Nonetheless, the criteria used for this finding are consistent with the genetic standards adopted by State fishery managers and allow for the limited presence of genetic material from other fish species in Yellowstone cutthroat trout conservation populations. The Service considers this consistent with the intent and purpose of the Endangered Species Act.

There are serious concerns about the future of theYCT population of Yellowstone Lake. The Service shares those concerns and will monitor the situation closely, but finds reason to believe the large scope of the Yellowstone Lake ecosystem and high level of ongoing conservation

actions will ensure YCT will persist in this ecosystem, at least for the foreseeable future. We do not find justification for applying the Distinct Population Segment (DPS) designation to this or any other subpopulation within the range of Yellowstone cutthroat trout.

The Service will continue to evaluate new information that may become available regarding these and other factors that could affect YCT populations.

What can be done to ensure Yellowstone cutthroat trout do not ultimately require ESA protection?

Numerous ongoing conservations efforts conducted by State, Federal, Tribal, local and nongovernmental organizations and other entities will help ensure the persistence of YCT populations.

However, if the existing proactive efforts to secure or improve the future population status of Yellowstone cutthroat trout do not continue or are not successful, or if existing factors lead to widespread declines in population status or new factors surface, then it is quite possible the subspecies will exhibit further declines. Evidence of widespread declines could lead to reconsideration of listing at some point in the future. It is very important that conservation efforts for this high-profile species continue in the intermountain west. The Service will continue to solicit and receive new information and actively participate in and support ongoing programs that lead to greater security for the Yellowstone cutthroat trout

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